



## The power of narrative Terry Cooper

Winter workshop 2011  
Monday 7th February

In this session I want to talk about stories and narrative and their place in our life and our work as therapists.

Stories are the glue of the post-personal, societal world, but there are also ways we have learned to use stories that can keep us from the individuated personal world, the experience of being me.

The focus of this paper is on how story telling can inhibit how we express ourselves and mask our deeper feelings.

To be able to accept, engage with, and manage all of the experiences of what it is to be human, it is necessary to recognise the limitations of story telling as a means of expression and differentiate what real thinking and somatic emotional events are taking place.

As therapists we need to recognise when story telling has become ritualized and repetitious and explore what is being avoided. Just as we have learned to attach ourselves to particular emotional states and are afraid to give them up, so, too, the story can provide a place to hide.

Learning to use story telling as an experience that supports our development involves a process of sensitizing ourselves to deeper somatic emotional experiences. All too quickly we create a story in our head in response to internal and external events and then behave as if the story is the truth, the whole truth. This is a coping mechanism, but it is a coping mechanism that, if not recognized and managed, creates a whole new set of problems on top of the actual events the person is trying to deal with.

The stories we form often reflect the degree of impact the original event has had on us. The making of the story within this scenario is a process of disembodiment in which we create a premature closure on our feelings and thoughts, by too quickly constructing a narrative.

To get to a truth takes time and requires openness to all of what we experience, not just the stories we produce in our head. One of the jobs of the therapist is to discuss with the client what the issues underlying this formulation might be.

The function of the narrative can only be understood by a detailed exploration of each individual's experience.

But here are a few areas to think about.

Narrative can be used to regulate or defend ourselves and this may involve healthy parts of ourselves as well as unhealthy parts. It can be to avoid self-contact meaning, being in touch with uncomfortable feeling and thoughts. It can be to protect a value system. It can be to protect an identity or sub-personality. It might be a transference or counter transference reaction. The list goes on.

Clients are mostly unaware of what they are saying or showing of themselves when they are telling a story, even though it captures and expresses something that they feel is important for them to tell. It is important for us to see the story as the beginning of the work and not accept it as the end or as a reality.

As Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist, said, "Stories and myths represent truths, but to take them as real events is like going into a restaurant, reading the menu, seeing what you want and eating that part of the menu. The menu is only there to tell you about the food, it isn't the food."

Let us look at issues for us as therapists. Our work involves listening to many stories - and many of us get stuck in the listening groove. The central issue for us as therapists is to recognise that stories can mesmerize us. We can become passive and find ourselves in a hypnotic state in which we have become absorbed and inactive.

Stories are compelling. We love them because they create a feeling of something concrete and we think we have captured reality when in fact we are making a reality. We have learned to translate experiences into narrative in a nano second. Dreams are a good example of this. A dream is a three-dimensional experience. When we are dreaming we are living the experience in the moment, in real time. But when the conscious brain catches a dream it translates it into a two-dimensional linear narrative, using the rational function of the brain to interpret it in its own language.

In my work with dreams and stories we reconstruct the experience of the different physical actions that are taking place within the dream or story. This is a process of embodiment. The different shapes, physical actions, postures and gestures that are captured by this methodology and incorporated into the whole experience are the body's language informing the brain about what it doesn't know and what other possibilities are present within the organism.



We have been taught to tell stories as a means of making sense of ourselves, of others and our world. But if the goal is only to make sense of experience and ignore the body's signals, we actually limit our understanding and this forces us to become dependent upon narrative as our main means of expression. This can in turn create loops of frustration and generate feelings of helplessness. It is usually the experiences outside of making narratives, the ones that do not make sense that the individual is struggling to manage.

Stories offer more riches and grow dimension when we engage with them in the same way as we might engage with a dream.

We have to learn to hold a bifocal view and look beyond the story to who are the creator and narrator of the story. What has been constructed and what is the function of this construction for them? What is the message of the story teller to others and what is the message the story teller is reinforcing for them self? Since these stories are the narrator's own creations they are perfectly edited to form the view the narrator wants to hold. They are not the truth and, although they are a reality, they do not represent the reality.

Humans in all cultures cast their own identity in some form of narrative and we need to remember when working with clients that we are not working on an issue, we are not working on a dream, we are working with a person who is experiencing issues. We are working with a person who has had a dream. The story then is a vehicle meant to take us in to the area of the real thing the person is having difficulty with. It is not the real thing itself. A humanistic view of therapy is about supporting what the person is trying to grow and we must encourage them out from behind the story so they are free to feel and experience more of themselves.

One of the ways we become spellbound by the story or dream as it is being shared is that we tell ourselves that the story or the dream is too precious to be interrupted. In my experience, interruption in the form of stopping the process and asking questions as the narrative unfolds turns it into a conversation and adds dimensions and layers to the work and what is being formed. It moves from a two-dimensional narrative to a three-dimensional experience and I believe the healing process of therapy can only take place within the context of a three-dimensional experience.

Making conversation throughout the story also increases the feeling of aliveness and participation of both the therapist and the client and gives the message that the telling of the story offers the possibility of learning something new. It also decreases therapist

overwhelm and jogs the client out of the narrative and into more of a feeling relationship with themselves.

Stories that are not questioned or challenged or engaged in as a dialogue often serve to reinforce past identities that are crying out to be ended. It is part of our work to have difficult conversations with clients concerning how they relate to these identities.

Story telling can also have a secondary function. People often tell stories in order to experience receiving attention and it can be very useful to observe and discuss with them how they handle attention, how they are handling it with you and what their history is around receiving attention.

If we can encourage clients to view the story as a metaphor rather than something fixed it is less threatening to them and will reduce their need to hide. They can start to open up to themselves and be less defensive about their own humanity and learn to grow the skill of identifying what the feeling of wanting attention is, what they might want it for and how to increase their comfort level around it.

By working experientially in the here and now with how the story or dream is experienced, we have an experience of interiority from which we can differentiate between ourselves and others, and in which we can be both, an individual and part of society.

Thank you.

## Terry's exercise

1. Take a moment to reflect on what I have been talking about and share what you took from what I said.
2. Think for a moment of the stories you tell yourself and how they form you.
3. Think of the stories you tell others. How are they different and how do they form you.